



November 5, 2003

PAGE ONE

To Find Peace In Sunni Triangle, Talk to the Sheiks

**Col. Mirabile Woos Tribes,
Like British Before Him;
Now, His Cup Runs Over**

By YAROSLAV TROFIMOV
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

IRAQ IN TRANSITION



• See [continuing coverage](#)¹ of developments in Iraq.

RAMADI, Iraq -- In the marble-floored home of a tribal chieftain here in guerrilla-infested western Iraq, Lt. Col. Hector Mirabile dug into a big platter of rice, chicken and lamb. He shared the communal meal with a man whom the colonel's troops had arrested just a few weeks earlier for trying to get American soldiers killed.

The suspect, Kurdi Rashid, wrapped in a Bedouin robe and a black shawl, mingled nonchalantly with the American soldiers at lunch. So did his brother the chieftain, Sheik Hamed Abu Alwan.

This sumptuous banquet was the result of an unusual deal that illustrates how American troops are learning some of this land's Byzantine ways. As they seek to survive almost daily attacks, the Americans are finding out, as previous occupiers have discovered over the centuries, that peace is impossible without wooing the tribes.


In a part of Iraq dominated by ancient tribal codes and a network of powerful chieftains, Col. Mirabile chose to release Mr. Rashid in exchange for a more valuable prize: Sheik Hamed's promise of peace from the entire tribe, numbering thousands of men. Military commanders are emulating this favors-for-protection approach across the region.



Hector Mirabile

Col. Mirabile, who commands the 1-124 battalion of the Florida National Guard, the American unit responsible for Ramadi, said he is sure Mr. Rashid "was doing bad things." After soldiers had surrounded the man's house and blasted open the door, they found five rocket-propelled grenade launchers buried in the backyard and a box of documents showing his deep involvement with Saddam Hussein's Baath party. Intelligence intercepts indicated that Mr. Rashid had been giving money to the guerrillas who are behind roadside bombs and ambushes that target Americans here almost every day. (Mr. Rashid claims to be innocent.)

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com. • [See a sample reprint in PDF format](#) • [Order a reprint of this article now](#).

Viewed from Baghdad, where the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority is trying to remake Iraq in America's image and install the rule of law, this would have been an open-and-shut case. And Mr. Rashid would be behind bars. Thousands of Iraqis arrested on the basis of far-less-compelling evidence of involvement in guerrilla activities languish in detention camps in the Baghdad international airport and the southern city of Umm Qasr.

But Col. Mirabile, a jovial 46-year-old whose civilian job is overseeing the budget of the Miami police department, had a concern that often trumps the pursuit of justice here in the heartland of anti-American resistance. He was interested in the safety of his 457 men, 34 of whom have been wounded in guerrilla attacks since May.

Many of those hits have occurred in a part of Ramadi under the control of Sheik Hamed, Mr. Rashid's brother and the banquet's host. So after the sheik, a wiry man who wears designer sunglasses and drives in a spotless Mercedes-Benz, came to ask Col. Mirabile's help in freeing his brother, both had something to trade. The price of Mr. Rashid's freedom was a stop to the daily roadside bomb attacks on the colonel's troops. So far, the bargain is holding. "All of a sudden, there is miraculous peace in my little area. I haven't had a bomb in a week," Col. Mirabile said, sipping sweet tea. "Here, it's not like a Western system.... It's all bartering and favors."

Befriending and cajoling the local chieftains is a tested way of ruling this part of Iraq. It's how the Ottoman and British occupiers kept peace, and it's how Saddam Hussein operated, too, often freeing political prisoners at the request of powerful Sunni tribes and rewarding chieftains with cash and gleaming limousines.

The sheiks here in Anbar can be unsavory characters. Many owe their fortunes to smuggling with Syria and Saudi Arabia, as well as to outright extortion and thievery. Bolstering their power goes against the grain of the occupation government's longer-term effort to transform Iraq into a showcase of Western-style democracy and civil society.



But the Coalition Provisional Authority is a distant presence here in Anbar. The authority has posted only one official in the entire Anbar province, which takes up a third of Iraq. Few of the leaders of Sheik Hamed's tribe, the biggest in Ramadi, Anbar's capital city, have even heard of him.

When Col. Mirabile's men rolled in from forward bases in Jordan, they knew nothing of Iraq's intricate patchwork of tribal alliances and old feuds, he says. To make up for this lack of intelligence, Col. Mirabile has been reading up on the British colonial experience and how British spies and bureaucrats a century ago cultivated the ancestors of some of the people he is dealing with today. He still finds it tough going. "I meet with a sheik every day," Col. Mirabile says, "But we still haven't gotten a handle on who is a real sheik and who isn't."

Still, the effort is worth it. Ramadi is far quieter than the nearby city of Fallujah, which is a cauldron of violence. It was near there that the U.S. Chinook helicopter was downed by guerrillas on Sunday, killing 15 U.S. soldiers. While Col. Mirabile, stationed in the same town since May, managed to establish a network of relationships on his turf, four different parts of the U.S. Army took turns running Fallujah in the same period. Residents there have been alienated by incidents including the killing of 18 demonstrators in late April and the mistaken killing of eight U.S.-trained Iraqi police by U.S. troops in September.

As Col. Mirabile spends his days going from sheik to sheik, he's making progress figuring out tribal etiquette and Iraqi eating habits. He's adept at compressing rice and meat into a ball with his fingers at the standing tribal banquets, where there are no forks or plates. And, as a sign of progress, he points out that when he is offered tea now the tiny glasses overflow and stand in a saucer full of spilled liquid. "If it's just barely full, it's a sign of disrespect," he said. That's how the glasses often looked in the beginning.

Above all, Col. Mirabile says, he has learned that cash is king. Discussions with tribal leaders quickly turn to requests that reconstruction contracts be steered the tribe's way -- and to suggestions for improving tribal neighborhoods. Using a special cash fund the U.S. military puts at the disposal of units, Col. Mirabile has spent \$700,000 on projects in the city. "Since 'Lawrence of Arabia,' not a damn thing here has changed -- the same infighting, the same political quarrels. The only change is that now they have cars instead of camels," the colonel said with a sigh. "And the only thing they really care about is their own profit margin."

As he visited Col. Mirabile's base in Ramadi just before the banquet, Sheik Hamed made sure to point out that he has little love for American rule. He derided the Iraqi Governing Council, appointed by the Coalition Authority in Baghdad, as "thieves who represent nobody but themselves." But he went out of his way to flatter Col. Mirabile. "My brother the colonel showed us great respect and great help," he said. "We are making him a member of our tribe."

That, presumably, would make Col. Mirabile more amenable to one of the sheik's current demands: more top spots in the regional government dominated by his tribal rivals, the Ali Suleiman. "We are a bigger tribe than they are, so how can a majority be ruled by a minority? Where is democracy?" the sheik asked. Col. Mirabile, who -- unknown to Sheik Hamed -- was to meet with the Ali Suleiman later that day, remained silent.

As the night fell on Ramadi, Col. Mirabile's soldiers put on their body armor and helmets to test, once again, Sheik Hamed's promise of peace. Someone took a harmless potshot at the three-Humvee patrol in Sheik Hamed's area, but it was a quiet night otherwise. As the soldiers drove by the sheik's house, they left undisturbed a large group of his relatives and armed bodyguards congregating on the road in clear violation of the local curfew. In a part of Ramadi controlled by a different tribe, Col. Mirabile's soldiers that night encountered three roadside bombs. The two that went off caused no injuries.

Back at the base, Col. Mirabile was glad that his favor to Sheik Hamed is paying off, one night at a time. "Keep your friends close," the colonel said with a smile, "but keep your enemies real close."

Write to Yaroslav Trofimov at yaroslav.trofimov@wsj.com²

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB106798448032531500,00.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) http://online.wsj.com/page/0,,2_0869,00.html

(2) <mailto:yaroslav.trofimov@wsj.com>

Updated November 5, 2003



Copyright 2003 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved



This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our **Subscriber Agreement** and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.